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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to contribute to the debate about how to raise standards of literacy. It summarizes early evidence from HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectors) about the teaching of writing within the National Literacy Strategy and exemplifies good practice in the schools inspected by HMI. In some respects it breaks with tradition in quoting directly from unpolished notes made by HMI during their inspection visits. The main findings discussed in the paper are: (1) there is still insufficient teaching of writing; (2) many schools commit a good deal of time beyond the literacy hour to extend writing, but much of this time is spent by pupils practicing writing rather than being taught how to improve it; (3) in many schools, an appropriate balance between the teaching of writing and reading has not yet been established; and (4) pupils are given plenty of opportunities to write in subjects other than English, but the skills learned in literacy lessons are insufficiently transferred into work in other subjects. (RS)

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THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: COULD DO BETTER

A discussion paper by HMI

Headlines

- There is still insufficient teaching of writing.
- Where writing is taught, there are significant weaknesses in too many lessons.

Introduction

1. The initial perception of many teachers was that the National Literacy Strategy was largely about the teaching of reading. Reading has always been seen as a high priority in primary schools and teachers recognised that the approach to the teaching of reading proposed by the Strategy was different to the practice found in most schools. Consequently, in the first months of the Strategy, much attention was given to the move from "hearing readers" to a more structured teaching of reading: the use of a shared text with the whole class, guided reading with a group of pupils and a more systematic approach to the teaching of phonics. These changes are having a positive impact on standards of reading, for which the National Literacy Strategy can take much of the credit.

2. Inspection evidence and the results of National Curriculum tests have indicated repeatedly, however, that the weakest element of the teaching and learning of literacy is now writing. In the 1999 Key Stage 2 English tests, for example, 78 per cent of pupils achieved Level 4 or above in reading. The comparable figure for writing was only 54 per cent. Too many pupils are unable to produce sustained accurate writing by the time they leave primary school. HMCI's Annual Report for 1998/99 stated that "improving the quality and quantity of the teaching of writing must now be seen as a priority for schools, literacy consultants and local education authorities".[1]

3. The performance of boys in writing is worryingly low; only 47 per cent achieved Level 4 in writing in 1999, compared to 62 per cent of girls. The gap between boys' reading and girls' reading is showing signs of reducing. By contrast, the difference between girls' and boys' writing remains as great as ever, while at the same time, standards of writing overall are too low and have shown almost no improvement over the last three years.

4. The issue is not restricted to Year 6 or Key Stage 2. In 1999, the gender gap in writing performance at the end of Key Stage 1 was the same as at the end of Key Stage 2: 61 per cent of girls achieved Level 2B or above in writing, compared with 46 per cent of boys

5. In the light of these findings, HMI looked closely at the teaching of writing, with a particular emphasis on Key Stage 2, in the schools visited in the spring term 2000

[1] The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (1998/99), OFSTED 2000, Pg 24

as part of the evaluation of the National Literacy Strategy. As well as looking at the teaching of writing within the literacy hour, HMI inspected the quality of writing being undertaken in subjects other than English, scrutinised samples of written work, and discussed with a sample of schools the steps they were taking to improve writing, especially that of boys.

6. This paper is intended to contribute to the debate about how to raise standards of literacy. It summarises early evidence from HMI about the teaching of writing within the NLS and exemplifies good practice in the schools inspected by HMI. In some respects it breaks with tradition in quoting directly from unpolished notes made by HMI during their inspection visits. A more comprehensive report on the impact of the National Literacy Strategy at the end of the second year of its implementation will be published in the second half of the autumn term 2000.

Main findings

7. The headlines are stark. There is still insufficient teaching of writing, although the amount of time given to it has risen considerably since September 1999. Where writing is taught, the quality of the teaching is sound or better in three-quarters of lessons. However, it remains unsatisfactory in a quarter of lessons; quite clearly, in too many literacy hours the teaching of writing is weak.

8. Many schools commit a good deal of time beyond the literacy hour to "extended writing", but much of this time is spent by pupils practising writing rather than being taught how to improve it.

9. In many schools, an appropriate balance between the teaching of writing and reading has not yet been established, although there are signs of improvement. For example, just over 300 literacy hours were observed by HMI in the autumn term, but there was no shared writing in three-quarters of these lessons. The balance between guided writing and guided reading was better; guided writing took place in half of the literacy hours seen in both key stages.

10. Pupils are given plenty of opportunities to write in subjects other than English. However, the skills learnt in literacy lessons are insufficiently transferred into work in other subjects. More could be done to use these lessons to teach the characteristics of the types of writing which are commonly used in other subjects, such as accounts in history, reports of investigations in science, or explanations in geography.

Commentary

11. A new sense of urgency has been injected into the teaching of writing because the meeting of the Government's targets for achievement in English by 2002 is at risk unless there is a significant improvement in the quality of pupils' writing. At present, far too many pupils leave their primary schools ill-equipped for the writing demands of the secondary curriculum. Most schools have achieved substantial gains in standards of reading in recent years and there are grounds for optimism that, through the National Literacy Strategy and the forthcoming

training and guidance on grammar for writing, they can achieve equally good gains in standards of writing.

12. Two preoccupations appear to be limiting the quality and quantity of the teaching of writing, especially at Key Stage 2. The first is an over-reliance on duplicated worksheets. The result is that too many pupils are being asked to undertake low level and undemanding writing tasks, requiring little or no sustained independent writing of any quality. The work involves little more than the completion of lists (of adjectives, for example) or the writing of dictionary definitions of vocabulary.

13. The second preoccupation is an over-reliance on the use of a good stimulus to inspire pupils to write. In itself, this is not a bad thing, but too often it is not backed up by the necessary teaching in the form of, for example, modelling the writing process or providing scaffolding to support pupils with their own written work. The price paid is insufficient high quality sentence level work. Frequently, such extended writing begins well, but fades quickly into inconsequential middle sections and clichéd endings.

14. Well taught sentence level work can promote rapid progress - progress that can be quickly recognised by the teacher and immediately appreciated by the pupils. For example, there was a sense of pride in the Year 4 class of a Wirral primary school when the pupils began to use what they had learned in their sentence level work. Their writing, on the theme of planets, showed they were making imaginative use of adjectives, adverbs and similes for description and some were using an adverbial phrase to open a sentence before the main clause.

15. The evaluation by HMI of the first year of the National Literacy Strategy[2] was quite explicit about the weaknesses in sentence level work:

> *Pupils were rarely required to produce grammatically complex sentences, showing different types of sentence connectives, adverbial phrases, imaginative vocabulary, precise use of language or an understanding of the difference between standard English and colloquial or dialect forms.*

16. In a Tameside school the Year 6 teacher responded to this issue by presenting his class, as a matter of routine, with examples of complex and sophisticated sentences; these provide a model for the pupils' own work and their impact and the reasons for it are discussed briefly. For example, on the day of the HMI visit the sentence for the day was,

> *"In spring the downs are heady with gorse, the golden glow of which is broken by white flowers of blackthorn."*

17. The HMI report on the first year of the Strategy continued:

> *It was also rare to see elements of the writing process being taught as part of a sequence of lessons. A small number of very good examples of such work*

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[2] The National Literacy Strategy. An evaluation of the first year of the National Literacy Strategy, OFSTED, 1999. Paragraph 84.

were seen, mostly towards the end of Key Stage 2. For example, the complexities of writing in a chosen genre (such as fable, horror story or press report) were explored; pupils were taught how to construct a coherent narrative with clear distinctions between the beginning, the middle and the ending of a story; and techniques for developing characterisation, such as through direct speech or actions, were studied[3].

18. The report was also quite clear about the value of the teaching of writing skills before and during the writing process for pupils, rather than afterwards through marking:

> *Pupils' progress in writing was greatly enhanced when the teacher provided direct guidance and instruction on an aspect of writing. A fairly typical example from a Year 3 class was seen where the teacher worked with a group of pupils on the writing of a book review. The pupils had all read the same book; they discussed not just the book itself but the purpose and nature of a review, and then, using a "writing frame", they wrote interesting reviews, giving their own opinions about the book.*[4]

19. Finally, there remain many teachers who are still unclear about the purpose of guided writing; they either sit with a group of pupils but do not engage them in sustained teaching, or they over-direct and lead every aspect of the work.

Good practice

20. Good practice in the teaching of writing was seen, but there was not enough of it. Where it was taught, the overall quality of the teaching of writing in the autumn term 1999 was good in only two-fifths of lessons. Nevertheless, a consistent picture emerged of the features of the best teaching of writing. Key features included:

- **a good technical knowledge of literacy**, often combined with enthusiasm and very good communication skills. An HMI in a Cornish primary school noted:

> *Teacher picks up work from previous days about producing poetry in polished form through revising, redrafting, and presentation. One girl's poem typed up on acetate – Monday's version, then Tuesday's – very effective! Very good questioning to focus pupils on exact details of text on OHP and to encourage evaluation. Good encouragement of their oral response to text. High levels of subject knowledge by teacher direct her questioning, e.g. about intensity of vocabulary. Teacher involves the class excellently. Is not diverted from her focus. Especially skilled re communicating idea of choosing exactly the right vocabulary to convey meaning as effectively and economically as possible. Excellent class management/discipline contributes to the progress made. Appropriately, class seated at their tables so can see OHP clearly.*

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[3] The National Literacy Strategy. An evaluation of the first year of the National Literacy Strategy. OFSTED, 1999. Paragraph 85.
[4] Ibid. paragraph 86

A good technical knowledge of literacy underpins the best planning: for example, of how phonemic awareness helps pupils to spell accurately, or how grammar helps to promote accurate and interesting writing. Teachers are finding the Framework itself helpful in clarifying their own understanding of aspects of language about which they are uncertain. Linking the objectives for a term with the necessary technical components need not be a complicated process, as the following example, a "working précis" from the Year 5 objectives, illustrates.

MAIN THRUST	OBJECTIVES[5]	COMMENTARY
Y5 • Composition of complex sentences	T1/2 S1 Word order T1 S3 Refine for clarity and correctness T1 S6 & T2 S5 Punctuation as signposting T1 S8 Extend work on verbs T2 S4 Revise agreement T2 S9 Embedded clauses T2 S10 Clarity of pronouns T3 S3 Prepositions T3 S4 Punctuation of complex sentences T3 S7 Connectives	In Year 5, the overarching aim is to help pupils to master and manipulate language for their own purposes. Over the year, they will add to their confidence a much greater competence in choosing, changing and shaping language. The management of complex sentences is a crucial objective. It will give pupils new powers over language and their work will gain a new gloss of sophistication.

- **the selection of appropriate good quality texts to illustrate the particular writing skills being taught.** The following example from a Year 5 pupil[6] shows that he has understood the characteristic structures and language of non-fiction and can transfer key features into his own writing. The influence of good quality non-fiction material was apparent throughout the lesson; for two weeks the class had used a range of non-fiction sources to investigate the effects of the Second World War on everyday life, as part of a history study unit on Britain since 1930:

  When Hitler invaded Poland the Prime Minister gave his troops until 11.00 September 3 1939 to have all his troops out of Poland otherwise he would declare war. It was 11.15 when the Prime Minister did.

  So that was it – Britain had gone to war. All the men between 18-41 had to go, but some were left behind if they had bad sight or maybe an injury which was very bad.

  The old men and the others left behind in each town or village formed a small group called the home guard, but who was going to work in the factories and the other places? It was the women. Posters were the main source of advertising. Some posters asked women to work in factories and other

[5] Note: T indicates the term in which the work is to be undertaken. S indicates a sentence level objective.
[6] Quoted from: Target Setting and Assessment in the National Literacy Strategy, QCA, 1999.

places, other posters said to give metal to collecting points and some asked to save clothing which was rationed.

The author has clearly been taught the features of non-fiction texts, for example: how paragraphs help organise material; the use of an impersonal voice to give authority; the use of dates and numbers to give a sense of expertise; and a balance between complex and simple sentences to give variety to the text.

- **the incorporation of word and sentence work into the teaching of writing**; for example, to link grammar with pupils' own writing. HMI found a good example of this in a Year 3/4 class in Somerset:

  Clear focus on Framework: 'write clear instructions using conventions learned from reading' and 'identify features of instructional texts'. Objectives re sentences noted for Y3 as well as Y4. Good, direct, focused questioning linked clearly to pursuing the objectives. Very good use of technical terminology in discussing the shared reading text, e.g. verbs, adverbs. Focus on punctuation, too, especially use of commas.

  Sentence level work tackled in the context of text-level shared reading. Done very well because contextualised, e.g. imperative verbs in context of instructional text and use of adverbs to qualify these verbs.

  Very good guided writing – genuinely guiding and supporting through questioning especially, and revisiting of points covered in shared reading. Very good use of subject specific vocabulary continues in guided writing. Teacher takes opportunity to reinforce grammatical points, e.g. about linking words, and draws attention to other linking words in the shared reading text.

- **intervention at the point of composition to teach writing skills**, rather than reliance on marking or correction after the event. Too often marking is little more than proof reading and forms no part of an editing or drafting process. Hence the importance of guided writing, where a teacher can work directly with a group of pupils to improve a piece of writing. HMI notes taken while observing such a session in a North East Lincolnshire primary school illustrate the point:

  The guided writing group tackled a demanding and challenging piece with their teacher. The piece was a description of science experiments pupils had completed early last week; the task was to convert this into a more impersonal non-fiction style of writing. The essential skills required were explained and discussed by the teacher, and then the teacher went through the text with the group. First, they used highlighter pens to eliminate unnecessary words. Then they identified sections which would need rewording in an impersonal style. The teacher reminded them of the need to use the present tense and the passive voice, and explained why. This gave the pupils confidence to tackle subsequent sections of the text, with the class teacher aiding and supporting individuals where necessary. A very good example of applying previously acquired skills with direct guidance from the class teacher, before and during the writing process itself.

- **the reinforcement and development of writing skills throughout the curriculum**. The examples given above show the value of using subjects other than English as the context of writing, especially the writing of non-fiction. The examples tend to come, however, from literacy hours. Although the structure of many lessons in other subjects has been influenced by the organisation of the literacy hour and the daily mathematics lesson, it was rare to see the necessary literacy skills required by other subjects being taught directly in those lessons. Early evidence from HMI indicates that when the teaching of literacy is incorporated into reading and writing in other subjects, progress is made in both English and the other subjects. An example, taken from HMI notes in a Gloucestershire primary school, makes the point:

  A history lesson (The Egyptians), with an objective of how newspapers report events which prove to be historically significant. The theme was Howard Carter's discovery of the tomb of Tutenkhamun. Recent newspaper articles were considered, using the story of a worldwide computer virus as the focus, and tracing the incident through both broadsheet and tabloid newspapers. Turning to the Egyptian story, the teacher, with lively and demanding direct teaching, taught and then challenged the class about the main events of the story which would "hit the headlines".

  Objectives were taken from the NLS Framework: to develop a journalistic style through considering what is of public interest in events, the interest of the reader, and the selection and presentation of the information. Pupils used wipe-clean laminated sheets on which to record ideas quickly and then to edit them after discussion.

  The majority of the class was able to produce the early stages of the newspaper reports. Very effective plenary presented by most able group (towards Level 5) using OHP overheads which they prepared in the group work. Used by the teacher to discuss important points and main features of the writing. The more able quickly grasped the fundamentals of tabloid style. Clear development of skills of non-fiction writing and understanding of an important historical event.

21. The above examples illustrate the features of good practice that impact strongly on the quality of pupils' writing. These features are of fundamental importance if the teaching of writing is to improve, but so too is the ability to incorporate them into the format of the literacy hour. Examples of lessons in which high quality teaching of writing was sustained throughout the hour were few, but this was achieved successfully in a Year 5 class in a Westminster school where the focus was on the language of myths and legends.

  After sharing the objectives of the lesson with the class, the teacher read an extract from "The Basilisk", using a large version of the text displayed at the front of the class. Pupils were then asked to say how the author had used words, particularly adjectives, to create a sense of mystery and repulsion around the central character, the mythical Basilisk. The teacher recorded these words on the board and there was useful discussion about the meanings of the least familiar. Lastly, the teacher used a combination of

questioning, explanation and discussion to construct a writing framework for the pupils to use for their own writing about a mythical creature.

A well-focused sentence-level session followed in which another extract from "The Basilisk", from which all punctuation had been removed, was used to reinforce the pupils' understanding of the importance of the comma in marking the grammatical boundaries in sentences.

In the independent work, the pupils worked in pairs to write detailed plans for their own writing about a mythical creature. The teacher concentrated on a group of the least able pupils for guided writing, for whom she had made a proforma to help them to structure their writing plans. The teacher worked intensively with the pupils immediately before they wrote parts of their own versions of the legend, producing confident, good quality writing. For example:

"He had a cruel and heartless expression and his roar shook the whole of the countryside."

In the plenary session, the plans of each of the groups were shared and discussed critically by the pupils, often with very perceptive comments. The level of interest was high because everyone had been involved in the same task. The teacher highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of what had been done so far and provided helpful reinforcement of what had been learned in the lesson.

Boys' writing

22. Given the weaknesses identified in boys' writing, it was surprising to find that many headteachers had either not recognised the extent of the problem in their schools, or had not taken steps to address it. While few schools would claim to have achieved anything like parity in performance in writing, a range of approaches was being considered or implemented. Several LEAs have been supporting their schools in this area. For example, Shropshire LEA helpfully set out possible approaches under a series of headings that included:

- recognise and monitor the problem;

- revise teaching and assessment strategies. For example, set clear targets for attainment for each unit of work, and make the objectives for lessons clear. Use competitive instincts constructively. Encourage the reading and writing of non-fiction;

- revise curriculum and assessment strategies. For example, ensure that the lesson content and resources have relevance to boys. Make full use of boys' knowledge and out of school learning. Use ICT, practical activities and enquiry-based learning, and other approaches that capture boys' interests and tap their natural skills;

- revise behavioural and management strategies. For example, encourage boys to take risks and "have a go";

23. There is clearly no simple answer to the challenge of how to raise the achievement of boys, especially in writing. A range of factors contributes to the issue, but perhaps clues can be picked up from those aspects of the curriculum in which boys tend to do rather well. In 1999, HMCI reported that,

> *The only area of the curriculum where boys do better than girls is in mental arithmetic. Boys respond particularly well to direct interactive teaching and enjoy the challenge of quickfire question and answer sessions. There are important implications here for raising the achievement of boys in other curriculum areas*[7].

24. This will be an issue that HMI will continue to investigate as part of their evaluation of the implementation of the National Literacy Strategy. HMI would be interested in hearing from those with a particular interest in the issue, and especially from schools that consider they have made a particular impact on the attainment of boys. Please see the final paragraph of this paper.

Key issues

25. **For schools**:

- ensure an appropriate balance between the teaching of reading and the teaching of writing in the Literacy Hour;
- ensure at Key Stage 1 that the teaching of phonics is linked to the teaching of writing as well as reading;
- ensure at Key Stage 2 that sufficient high quality sentence level work is undertaken;
- ensure that, within the total time given to writing, sufficient is used for the direct teaching of writing;
- ensure that the teaching of phonics, spelling, grammar and punctuation is incorporated into the teaching of composition itself;
- ensure that writing skills are developed and applied in subjects other than English;
- recognise and act upon the need to teach at the point of writing rather than relying on marking and correction to address weaknesses;

26. **For LEAs and their Literacy Consultants**:

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[7] The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools, 1998/99. OFSTED 2000, paragraph 7.

- ensure schools are giving appropriate priority to the teaching of writing and support them in addressing the issues raised above;

- disseminate good practice;

- tackle gaps in teachers' subject knowledge through programmes of in-service training in, for example, grammar and teaching of grammar.

Conclusion

27. Those responsible for the development of the National Literacy Strategy have recognised the need to provide greater support for, and guidance in, the teaching of writing. For example, training and teaching materials are being prepared to help consultants and teachers develop their personal knowledge and confidence of grammar, and their skills of teaching sentence level work. A glossary of terms used in the Framework has been extended and revised[8]. This should support the focus on grammar and writing which is now recognised as central by the Literacy Strategy. Such materials will be timely, and the training with which they are linked will be an important step forward. Writing is not an abstract skill that can develop at a leisurely pace when the muse strikes. It is an essential skill of learning and must be taught effectively if the quality of pupils' writing is to improve.

28. This discussion paper raises issues about the teaching of writing. It also provides, through examples of pupils' work and the analyses of successful teaching, encouragement that there is good practice in schools. This is certainly the case, but it remains the view of HMI that there is not nearly enough good practice and, certainly, not yet enough to improve writing sufficiently to achieve the national target for 2002. The need now is for the good practice to be disseminated as widely and quickly as possible, with much more widespread analysis and discussion of what works, and what gets in the way of progress. This paper contributes, it is hoped, to this process, but the people making the difference, as always, will be teachers in schools (especially and increasingly "expert literacy teachers"), supported by their literacy consultants.

29. Finally, we should like to invite readers of this discussion paper to contribute <u>both</u> examples of interesting, high quality pupils' writing, saying a little about the pupils and circumstances, <u>and</u> an analysis of the teaching, showing the link between teaching methods and the quality of the finished product. If you would like to contribute to our evidence of "what works", in this way, please send your contribution, headed "Teaching of Writing", by email to:

    kwoodward@ofsted.gov.uk

[8] Available on the Standards website (http://www.standards.dfee.gov.uk/literacy/glossary).

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